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ABSTRACT

Enjoyment of ethnic food can be the "point de depart" for tracing the heritage of the people being studied and for broadening students' horizons. This article outlines a study of food throughout the centuries, particularly in Europe. The "gastronomic route" begins historically with the Minoans around 2000 B.C., continues with the Greeks and the Romans in Italy and southern France, and concludes with a discussion of Arab influences on European cooking. Geography is inseparable from history; it, too, can be taught through a study of regional foods and the reasons for their use. The food industry, exportation of cooking styles, daily living habits and family life are other aspects of cultural study that can be made more enjoyable through the gastronomic approach. Activities that involve preparing and serving foreign foods are suggested. (AMH)

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"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are." Brillat-Savarin, the great French chef of the early nineteenth century is supposed to have said it first. In using his quote as a subtitle today, I mean to illustrate how enjoyment of ethnic food can be the point de depart for tracing the heritage of the nationality being studied historically, geographically, socially, and practically. Food is the foreign language teacher's friend. It is universal and self-motivating. If one of our aims is to broaden horizons for our students, the gastronomic route is one of the most satisfactory. In the classroom, the use of foreign food is one of the easiest ways to create the illusion of travel. And en voyage, new and strange food is one of the first things a traveler must learn to accept and, if possible, to enjoy.

To begin with the Mediterranean area, which is where most of the languages we teach had their roots, a study of food through the centuries could go back to the Minoans around 2,000 B.C., and it sounds surprisingly modern. Grapes and olives were being cultivated. In Minoan ruins on Crete, inventories carved in stone list figs, honey, coriander, sesame, fish and wine as being in the storeroom. (Those Mediterranean figs, you may recall, played a role in I, Claudius, the recent television series). Minoan cookware was much like French utensils of today. Gourmandise as well as conquest was already inspiring international trade. The Minoans sailed up the west coast of Europe to Britain to exchange olive oil for tin, and east to the Orient for cinnamon and black pepper.

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Later, the Greeks colonized Marseille and Southern Italy and Sicily, introducing viniculture throughout the region. They also wrote cookbooks. Apicius, a Roman gourmet, wrote a cookbook which still exists, showing what a wide variety of meats and vegetables the Romans ate, most of them highly seasoned with herbs and spices, as well as garum, a

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revolting-sounding fish sauce, which was commercially bottled and put on almost everything except sweets. The ruins of Pompeii present grocery lists and food shops of all kinds. A suckling pig was found in a pot and bread in the oven. Already in Italy of the first century A.D., fast food shops were popular, some with scup pots built into the counter. The Emperor Vitellius was once offered 2,000 separate dishes at a banquet. From around the Mediterranean came dates, raisins, strawberries, chestnuts, herbs, truffles, fish, crabs, crayfish, pigs, sheep, tongues of hummingbirds and brains of ostriches. Omit only two of these (and you may guess which two!) and we have a list of some of the most popular foods in the region today. The ancient Romans liked to serve birds in their plumage, as does the classic French cuisine of much later centuries. A clue to the value put upon seasonings is the fact that Alaric the Goth asked 3,000 pounds of black pepper as a ransom for the city of Rome in 409 A.D.

In contrast to the decadent Romans and uncivilized Goths, the Arabs brought Oriental luxuries and family life into the diningrooms of the Western Mediterranean. They introduced rice, sugar cane, oranges, lemons, and new spices. At one time Italy and Mauretania exchanged [illegible] and sugar, kilo for kilo. Spanish cuisine is largely Arab in origin. Paella resembles Persian pilaf. The Crusades further mingled European and Middle Eastern cultures and cuisines. Damson plums came from Damascus, hence their name; and shallots from Syria - indispensable to French cooks. Arab control of the Eastern Mediterranean stimulated the Spanish and Portuguese to explore the New World, whence they brought back tomatoes, pimentos, cayenne pepper, paprika, chili peppers, potatoes, pineapples, avocados, and maize.

Italian cuisine was descended from the Roman and went on to influence the French. Catherine de Medici in the sixteenth century brought her Florentine master chefs with her when she came as wife of Henri II, bringing about a Renaissance in food as well as in art. French food was started on the way to the haute cuisine which is now the most renowned in the world.

History is inseparable from geography, and my observation has been that our students tend to be woefully deficient in both. If food can help motivate the study of history and geography, let's use it.

All the Mediterranean cuisines are fundamentally based on olive oil, and all make imaginative use of the same vegetables and fruits - artichokes, eggplant, sweet and hot peppers, tomatoes, garlic, olives, lemons and oranges. In nearly all, lamb is the meat used most often, and fish and other seafoods are staples. Some countries, such as Greece and France, are divided gastronomically and geographically, with the more fertile northern pastures being able to support milk and beef cattle, and the southern hilly areas populated by sheep. On the same hillsides grow thyme and rosemary for seasoning. France can also be divided on the basis of wine or cider production. Spain has three gastronomic regions determined by latitude: potatoes and beef in the north; fish, rice and pork in the south; lamb, chick peas and beans in the central provinces - with the favorite seasonings of pimento and saffron reflecting the colors of the Spanish flag.

Farther north in a colder climate, a more substantial diet nourishes Germans and Austrians - pork, kraut, potatoes, beer, and rich desserts. The Roman legions introduced grapes to the banks of the Danube. Switzerland has three languages and three cuisines; but it is best known for

cheese and chocolate. Russia's vast geography encompasses a vast variety of food, showing both Oriental and Western influences, from caviar to Polish sausage.

A whole new chapter can be written on the exportation of cooking styles to the former colonies of the various mother countries. Mexico has borrowed from Spanish, Portuguese, and African cuisines and adapted them to the climate and the soil, with variations on the same theme all the way down the length of Latin America. What first comes to your mind when you hear the word "creole"? Or "Pennsylvania Dutch"? Probably food, and of a sort to make your mouth water! And of course each culture has a history and language attached.

Food can be the springboard for another cultural departure - the occupations connected to the food industry. Returning to the ancient Romans, the emperors had not only an army of cooks in the kitchen, but also a praegustator to pre-taste everything, a nomenclator to call out the name of each dish, and a scissor to cut the meat into pieces, besides musicians, dancing girls, slaves weilding fans in the diningroom, etc. The modern food industry employs huge numbers, from scientific farmers through the transport workers, wholesale dealers, and advertisers, to retail merchants and restaurant staffs. Farmers' markets everywhere are colorful and fascinating segments of the local culture. From a study of occupations, it is a natural step to the economy of the country in general for those students mature enough to be interested.

Let us now leave the food industry as such and think about the family at the dining table. In European homes, dinner is likely to be a more structured institution than in America. It may be at noon, even if stores have to close to permit the family to assemble and give proper

attention to the serious business of eating. Table manners have their differences and fine points, and children may be expected to eat like adults. A meal that the mother has spent all day preparing from scratch deserves respect. The father will not likely help with the dishes, but his mealtime role is to direct the conversation and be appreciative of his wife's food. Of course in many places, commuting fathers and employed mothers are bringing about the Americanization of mealtime; but this phenomenon deserves attention, too.

In a very practical way, cooking can serve to introduce the metric system in a foreign language classroom. Using European recipes to prepare food gives practice in changing gram measurements into cup and teaspoon terms.

Finally, some ideas about implementing these studies. One practical way to compare foods is to read foreign newspaper ads, noting prices and variety. Or students can make maps of where these foods are produced. They can give reports on any interesting phase of food production and/or consumption. If material is available only in English, advanced classes could translate it into the target language for lower classes. It doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece. Straight narrative style conveys the thought, and it's bound to enhance their vocabulary.

But the real thing is to <u>eat</u>. Each student can bring in a dish typical of the country being studied. This is likely to produce too much food, but it leads to good public relations, because you can invite the administration in to taste it. A class meeting early in the day can have a continental breakfast. A cheese tasting is always popular, even without wine. An international dinner for the entire department or

entire school, followed by a program of music, dances, etc., is a good evening's entertainment. A dinner partly prepared at home and finished up on a hotplate in the classroom can usually be managed within class time. Or the class can go out to a meal in a restaurant, preferably one where they can order in the language.

One of my favorite experiences combining history, geography, and French colonial food came about this way. One summer I was taking a course in French conversation in Caen, Normandy. The professor brought in from time to time French persons for us to talk to, people of different ages, sexes, and stations in life. One was a woman from a French Algerian family, a repatriate, who described the life her family had led in a modest French quarter of Algiers, on friendly terms with their Algerian neighbors, until the war for Algerian independence broke out. Suddenly life-long friends didn't know any more who was a friend and who an enemy. French were kidnapped by the rebels and never seen again. Algerians were shot dead on the street by French soldiers. It was a tense and tragic time and the woman told it well. The atmosphere in the classroom became tense, especially since some of the students were from Arab countries. After she finished, there were questions during which serious political problems were discussed and the atmosphere was growing emotional. I had a question - not a political one, but it seemed to me the time was ripe for a change of pace. So I asked, "Madame, est-ce que vous avez une bonne recette pour le couscous?" She laughed and answered, "Mais oui, bien sur!" and the whole class laughed and relaxed. She was so pleased to be asked that she came back the next day with the recipe written out very distinctly in great detail, including a sketch of how to steam the cereal, and gave me a box of the couscous cereal.

Since she took pains to write so clearly, I can give her handwritten recipe to my students to translate and follow. The first class that used it wrote her a note of thanks. As a finale to a unit on the French-speaking world, we had an Arab meal in this year's French IV class, about a month ago. The menu included couscous, avocado and grapefruit salad, olives, Sahara bread, dates, almonds, and mint tea. We turned out the lights and used a lamp and candles in glasses, and put Arab music on the phonograph. We also burned incense, but it wasn't really necessary because the couscous was so fragrant. For several of the class, it was their first taste, not only of couscous, but of dates, avocados, and mint tea. At the same time they had become familiar with a recipe written in French and had learned a little bit about the war for Algerian independence. The horizons were slightly broadened.

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